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Personal Watercraft Operators Urged to Exercise Caution, Follow Safety Laws

BOSTON – Following two recent accidents involving personal watercraft (PWC), one seriously injuring a Worcester girl on that city's Indian Lake and another that resulted in the death of a New England Patriots player in Louisiana, the Massachusetts Environmental Police today announced that environmental police officers are stepping up patrols on targeted waterways across the Commonwealth.

Noting that PWCs comprise approximately six percent of all registered vessels in the state but accounted for about 17 percent of reported accidents in the past five years, Massachusetts Environmental Police (MEP) Director James J. Hanlon urged PWC operators – and all boaters – to obey the law and exercise caution and good sense on the water. Hanlon said that, with the Commonwealth's boating season entering high gear, many local harbor masters and police departments are also on patrol, actively enforcing state and local laws and regulations.

Because PWCs are more maneuverable than other boats – allowing sharp turns that can unexpectedly put a vessel in harm's way – PWC operators are urged to keep a sharp lookout and maintain a safe distance from other boats and swimmers. Operating within 150 feet of a bathing beach is illegal. In addition, the following Massachusetts boating laws and regulations apply:

- PWC operators and passengers alike – regardless of age – must wear a Coast Guard-approved, properly fitted life jacket at all times while underway. Post-accident investigations by the MEP and marine enforcers nationwide show that by simply wearing life jackets, many lives could be saved.
- PWC operation is prohibited between sunset and sunrise, and on bodies of water smaller than 75 acres.
- PWCs are prohibited from towing anyone or anything.

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- Children under the age of 16 are prohibited from operating a PWC, regardless of prior boating education or experience on other types of craft. Operators aged 16 and 17 must carry proof that they have successfully completed a state and nationally approved boating safety course.
- As with all vessels, operating under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol is prohibited.

Hanlon pointed out that PWCs are equipped with lanyards that can be attached to the operator's wrist or lifejacket. The other end of the lanyard is connected to the craft's ignition switch. If an operator falls off the PWC, the lanyard will be pulled from the ignition, causing the machine to stop so that the operator can safely re-board. These "kill switch" lanyards must not be circumvented and should be worn whenever a PWC is underway.

To view or download a summary of PWC safety laws, go to <http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dle/pwcsafety.htm>. For an online edition of the Massachusetts Environmental Police's "Your Guide to Boating Laws and Responsibilities," visit <http://www.boat-ed.com/ma/handbook/index.htm>. Environmental Police also recommend that all boaters take a boating safety course prior to operation, whether or not required by law. For a list of courses and approved course providers, go to: <http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dle/courselist.htm> or call 508-759-0002.

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